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ABSTRACT

Two poor inner city predominantly Black school districts (East St. Louis and Lovejoy, Illinois) entered into a joint agreement to enhance delivery of special education services to their children. Initial mistrust began to give way when a common philosophy was reached. Approaches developed included diagnostic and prescriptive teaching and individualized instruction. Transportation became the biggest problem in the joint effort. The approach served more students than previously and the author recommends the model as a way of better serving Black exceptional students. (CL)

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AN ADMINISTRATIVE MODEL FOR SERVING EXCEPTIONAL BLACK CHILDREN

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Introduction:

There can be and often is a great deal of ongoing, never ending distress in being made to feel inferior. Black children who are exceptional (even those who are gifted) are often made to feel inferior. The treatment of Blacks, even today, often appears designed to impress upon Blacks a lowly position. The exceptional/handicapped Black child, if not educated and/or trained, has a doubly low and inferior, as well as a precarious position in society.

Exceptional Black children who live in inner-city, ghetto areas (and most do) are especially vulnerable to feelings of inferiority and are the victims of stultifying low self-esteem. Their low socio-economic status worsens their problems. Inner-city school districts are, for the most part, poorly financed because of their crumbling and fast disappearing tax bases, and hence, do not have the money to provide adequate services for their pupils...exceptional or otherwise. And so, when money is in short supply and services have to be cut back, it is the exceptional Black child who suffers. We must help children survive both the "Black Experience" and the "Exceptionality Experience". Quality education remains the key to survival.

Background:

It is important and it is urgent that we develop new and alternate ways of service delivery to Black students who live in inner-city type areas. One way of expanding and enhancing special education services for

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many exceptional Black children in less affluent school districts is through the development and use of some kind of cooperative and inter-district plan. Such a plan would possibly involve desegregation. Cooperatives or joint agreements are prevalent in many states, particularly in rural, semi-rural and suburban areas. However, joint agreements are somewhat rare in predominately Black areas. In such mid-western states as Missouri and Illinois, joint agreements have litterally blossomed and matured. In Illinois cooperative planning comes under the heading of the "Joint Agreement Plan".

In Illinois it is mandated that the superintendent of the educational service region call together the boards of education of districts which are not meeting the special educational needs of pupils, and recommend a plan to meet such needs. With the advent of Public Law 94/142 the meeting of special educational needs became mandatory all across the nation. (Illinois mandated special education in 1969). Even though special education was mandated, not all exceptional children were being served. This was particularly true in my home district of East St. Louis and in a neighboring smaller district, Lovejoy. These districts are economically depressed and are predominately Black.

We had long heard of well known nearby, predominately white cooperatives, with their adequate budgets, large staffs, fleets of busses and myriad other enviable help for their exceptional children. We were inner-city, Black and poor but the State of Illinois left our two districts no choice but to "wed in a shot-gun marriage" so as to provide adequately for our exceptional students. Thus, East St. Louis and Lovejoy entered into a joint agreement. The pupil population of the combined districts was 22,500, with about 2300 exceptional learners spread across all

exceptionalities. As is the usual procedure in Illinois, one district was designated as the administrative district and the smaller district (Lovejoy) was designated as the member or participating district.

A plan was worked out whereby each district's financial share was determined (the formula mandated by the Illinois School Code). Now, before I get too far ahead of myself in my story, let me back up and tell you that forming this particular service delivery model was not as easy as it may seem. It was necessary for us to utilize carefully thought out strategies and techniques to overcome problems which kept cropping up at the genesis of the formation of the joint agreement. Our superintendents and school boards...and even I, as director, were wary of each other, of the superintendent of the educational service region, of the state education office and of some staff members. We were naturally concerned about shaky finances, possible loss of autonomy and impossible logistics. As director of special education, I had to "sell" the joint agreement concept to my staff and to the superintendents of both districts. We had to lay aside our fears, our squabbles and had to build a level of personal and professional trust in order to "sell" both school boards that this was the only way to comply with our mandates and provide quality education for exceptional learners in both school districts. The tasks were not at all easy.

In establishing our inner-city cooperative it was necessary at times to use raw politics, polished politics, persuasion, brain-washing, threats, charm and propaganda. We even used nearby predominately white joint agreements as examples. We said..."If <u>they</u> can use this effective model to expand and enhance delivery of special services for their children, <u>we</u> can do it too."

Finally, as we gained confidence in ourselves and in each other, we

were able to realize that deep within each of us was the common philosophy that all children...Black, white, exceptional and regular...must be educated to the limit of their ability in an environment that meets their needs and enhances their abilities. When we reached that philosophical agreement we were "home free"! Throughout our struggles to establish the cooperative we found that parents were our greatest allies. Our parents were effective "politicians" on behalf of their children. Once we got rolling we followed orderly procedures such as entering into a legal contract, establishing a joint agreement board, financing and delineating, as well as delivering services.

Philosophy:

We subscribed to the philosophy that "Love is Not Enough" and that to activate love for the exceptional children in our care we must offer our talent and our hard work. Deeply engrained within the fiber of our philosophy was that each child is a unique and precious individual. We concurred with Bronowski (Ascent of Man) that children are not clones.

Joint agreement philosophy involved our school psychologists adhering to the policy of not relying solely on the IQ score as a diagnostic tool. We believed that global IQ scores routinely used and reported may have had an undesirable effect upon teacher expectancies, and that this potentially harmful effect would be greater because none of the commonly used testing instruments have been standardized upon our population or upon a similar population.

Services:

We made provisions for all categories and cross-categories of exceptional children. I will not enumerate these programs, but it is sufficient

to say that every exceptionality, in children age 3 to 21, was programmed for. We were able to build a fine professional and paraprofessional staff of nearly 200 persons, to serve the children of the joint agreement. Services were offered in self-contained classroom, resource room, itinerant staff, special school and consultant service formats. Our services were well organized and well supervised.

We used individual assessment and evaluation techniques within a team approach format. Our child study team included a social worker, psychologist, regular and special teacher, parents and other persons who had direct knowledge concerning our children.

Our services included diagnostic and prescriptive teaching and individualized instruction. Our professional feeling was that Black exceptional children particularly need the well planned individualized approach in order to overcome their deficits. Our services and the delivery of them were in tune with our "Love is Not Enough" philosophy. We did a great deal of work with parents and with regular class teachers, as well as doing much in-service training with our own special education staff. We followed a policy of mainstreaming, and we were careful not to "abandon" our exceptional children by placing them in regular education classrooms without support services. In sum, as regards services, we did what any well trained, dedicated, sincere special educator would do. We did our best.

Problems:

Any special education cooperative has certain problems which are unique to the operation. We certainly had our problems. We were not perfect and we made mistakes. Our biggest and most frustrating and most

overriding problem was transportation. We used busses and even taxi-cabs to transport children who needed special transportation services. Transportation was unreliable at best and a big headache at worst. The majority of transportation problems were traced to the caliber of transportation staff, as well as to the unreliable condition of the vehicles. (On one school day 14 out of 21 drivers were absent from duty---and they weren't on strike either:)

Possible Effects of Litigation/Legislation:

Legislation made it imperative and mandatory that Black children, and all children who need special education, be provided with a free, appropriate, public education in the least restrictive environment. The fact that most whites fled the two school districts involved in our joint agreement(and took their money with them) did not relieve us of the legal and moral responsibility of providing special education services for the exceptional children in our care. The fact that most of these children were Black made it even more crucial that we serve their special needs.

Various types of court cases have been forces on behalf of exceptional children and exceptional Black children have been the beneficiaries of such cases revolving around the following issues: right to an education; placement/ discriminatory interclass grouping; testing/language barriers/ cultural bias; parental participation; compensation for damages; and due process. We now know that legislation at state and federal levels now addresses all these issues except compensation for damages. Inner-city districts such as the two described in this paper are especially vulnerable to the aforementioned issues. I submit that one way of addressing these issues and complying with state and federal laws is by forming a joint agreement with a nearby dis- and thereby provide quality special education services for the children

in both districts.

Conclusion:

Despite problems and pain, the joint agreement service delivery model does work. A review of the history of East St. Louis School District 189 and Lovejoy School District 188 reveals that more children were served after the districts "wed" than before. A 1979 study by Wright appears to confirm that the administrative district (East St. Louis) did grow in service delivery and in funds spent on exceptional learners in the period after mandating and after the formation of the joint agreement, even though the State of Illinois share of special education funding did not keep pace with the local share of funding.

In establishing our cooperative and in working so hard to maintain it as a viable service delivery model for exceptional Black children, we remembered that Black people are locked into a desperate life struggle and that the exceptional Black child bears the double burden of exceptionality and color. The only way Black children can survive in our social order is to get as much appropriate education and/or training as their assessed abilities will allow. We see the joint agreement model as using talents, funds, facilities and staff to the very maximum level for exceptional Black inner-city youngsters.

At last check-up I found that the "marriage" between the two districts described in this paper, is fruitful and harmonious. Blacks can work together harmoniously for the benefit of our exceptional Black children. We are proud that our predominately Black districts have won state-wide recognition for serving exceptional learners.

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